

THE WHITE HOUSE

Copy 2 of 2
WH 0300545
RECEIVED

MAY 22, 2003

Office of the Press Secretary

Internal Transcript

National Commission on
August Terrorist Attacks

INTERVIEW OF PRESS SECRETARY ARI FLEISCHER
BY TERRY MORAN OF ABC

Room 459
Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building

11:52 A.M. EDT

Q Well, let's go back to September 11th, that morning in Florida, before the events happened. What was the biggest thing on your agenda, on the President's agenda, that day?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, it was a very routine day. And it began, as many days did, with an education event, where the President was going to help little children learn how to read. And all I could think of was, Just another day at the White House. Just another routine day.

Q The motorcade; take us back to that motorcade. At what point -- because it was at some point on the motorcade to the school that word came of the first plane hitting the first tower. What happened?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, what happened was as we were pulling into the school, on the school's driveway, just as we were getting there and slowing down, I received a page. Everywhere I go, I will travel with a pager, and there is somebody in the office here in the White House who will constantly send me updates about what's on the wires, what's in the news, so I can always be informed.

And just as we pulled in, I got the page saying, World Trade Center has been hit by an aircraft. It was the only information that we had. And like everybody, my first thought was it must be some type of terrible accident.

And as the President got out of his limo and got into the school, he finished shaking hands with a group of schoolteachers and administrators before even going into the classroom. And Karl Rove whispered in the President's ear that the World Trade Center had been hit by an aircraft. And that's how the President first heard about it.

Rove
told
Pohus

000079

Q At that moment, what was his reaction, that you could gauge?

MR. FLEISCHER: The President was surprised. He thought it had to be an accident. I've heard him later say that he, being an old pilot himself, thought a pilot flown off course, it would have to be a small aircraft. It was just unimaginable it could have been anything else at that moment.

And the President went immediately into a holding room, where -- everywhere the President goes, there's a holding room set up with secure phones, which we almost never, ever have to use. It's set up in case of emergency. And on the 11th, it was used.

The President was on the phone with Dr. Condoleezza Rice, his National Security Advisor, filling him in about what little, at that point, was known. And it was still, as everybody thought that this was a terrible accident, and that New York City needed help.

Q Why the National Security Advisor, then, if it seemed to be an accident? Was there a sense, even at that early stage, somewhere, that there was a possibility that this could be an attack?

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't think anybody really thought it would be. Not after the first plane was hit. Everything we thought of was an accident and that New York City needed federal resources, because the World Trade Center had been hit, people were injured. We didn't know the extent of it immediately at that moment -- remember, this is all happening live. Americans are watching it on TV live, it's unfolding.

Not watching TV

And we're not watching TV. The President's going into a school event to teach children how to read. So he's getting the information from people -- Dr. Rice fills him in; she was really the senior person in Washington. Traveling that day in Florida were the Chief of Staff, Andy Card; Karl Rove; myself; Dan Bartlett. And so Condi filled him in from Washington, didn't tell him anything that he didn't know from what we learned on the ground. But we were monitoring it, and that's what the President asked Condi to do.

Q So the President goes into the schoolroom with the kids. And we all know the now-famous picture of Chief of Staff Card telling him. Just before that moment, though, do you know how the word came of the second attack? What happened?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, what happened was Andy stayed back in the holding room, working the phones to Washington to get additional information. And as he was doing that, of course, he got the word that the second tower was hit.

000080

I got a page again, saying the second tower was hit. And I was in the room with the President, and immediately I thought, This must be terrorism. There cannot be any other explanation.

It was at that time Andy entered the schoolroom, and in that now-famous moment he whispered in the President's ear, the second tower has been hit; America is under attack.

And to this day, I'm just struck by how the President reacted to that news. He was almost stoic. He was in a roomful of little children who knew nothing. And he didn't change his facial expression, he didn't show what obviously had to be nothing but alarm and concern. And he even, minutes later, as he cut the meeting short, he said to the children, You must be such good readers, you must be in the sixth grade. They were all third-graders. Somehow, he just had the composure to say to those children something consoling and soothing. They wouldn't know anything, of course, about the attack, but he did that.

I maneuvered over to the President, and I wrote on the back of a pad, "Don't say anything yet." Because the President was prepared, in front of the press in that room, to say that the World Trade Center has been hit, the resources of the federal government will be available to help New York with this terrible tragedy -- because even if it had been one plane that flew off course, the city needed help.

But once we heard it was two towers, then I thought the most important thing was, one, to ascertain all the information, all the facts, before speaking. So I wrote, "Don't say anything yet" on the back of a notepad. I maneuvered over and put my back to the press, so the press wouldn't see that. And I gave instructions to get the press pool out of the room as quickly as possible; that way, the first word the American people would hear would not be shouted questions to a President who only had barely any information.

And then the President was able then to go into the holding room and collect more information before talking to the country.

Q Let me go back to that moment where Andy Card tells him the news. There is that picture, and his face is -- is what? You know that face so well, you work with it every day. What do you see registered as he gets that news?

MR. FLEISCHER: Terry, I've been with the President for a long time, now. And I can only say that any time I have seen him in a position where something dramatic happens, he is just steady. And I think that picture said it all. I think -- imagine. Just -- forget the President; for any human being to be given that news, you would think there would be alarm, there would be a startled reaction. But he was clear-headed and steady, and took the news, digested it, finished what he was doing in a hurry but didn't immediately break it off -- sending

000081

a signal of alarm if he had. And I think that calm, measured, steely reaction is what the American people saw throughout this whole crisis in the President.

Q Behind the scenes, then, after he leaves the classroom, and the news is coming in that this is an attack, what's the mood like? Is there --

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, it was constantly calm. Right into the holding room, and then as we boarded Air Force One later and traveled that day, everybody from the President on down was calm and was in a mode to collect information, to ascertain facts.

The President, in the holding room, started -- was working the phones back to Washington, talking to Dr. Rice. I think he talked to the Vice President -- getting information about what happened, what's the extent of the injuries, how much help does New York need, are we doing everything we can to respond, to help the people of New York? And then the President wrote in longhand his own notes, what he wanted to say when he went in and addressed a larger group that was waiting for him after, outside the classroom, to give a speech.

And the President went into that larger group and said there's been an apparent terrorist attack on the United States. I'm going to be leaving to return to Washington. Secretary Paige will stay here to talk to the people about the education initiatives that he was there to discuss that day.

Q One of your jobs is to help him craft statements like that. How did you prepare him, or help to prepare him, for that statement?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I bounced some ideas off of the President about what it was I thought he should say. I started to draft them myself, and the President would listen to the ideas and then write it down in his own hand. And that's what he did.

Q And that statement has been criticized, as you know, by some for its informality, because he said we're going to get "those folks", and some people detect a hesitancy in his statement. What do you think of that criticism?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, you know, I think that especially on that first day, it shows there were still people who, even on a day when America is under attack, will engage in senseless partisanship. And I think looking back, people who criticized him wish they hadn't. And it's a part of Washington.

Q So -- one thing you've said is that there was this businesslike demeanor, "ascertaining facts." As the rest of the country watched these events unfold, one of the dominant emotions that a lot of people felt was fear. Was there any of that? At

any point, did you step back or did you get the sense that people were afraid for the country?

MR. FLEISCHER: Afraid for the country, yes. There was never a sense, traveling with the President, of physical fear, to the traveling party or to the President. And I think that's just because while, on the one hand, the President is always the most prime target for terrorists around the world, he's also probably in one of the safest spots around the world, because of the great job the Secret Service does.

But there was fear for the country. This was unknown. And -- just to see it on TV, to see the collapse of the World Trade Center, to see wonderful institutions that were bedrocks of America's strength crumble -- the Pentagon, the Twin Towers -- and as a New Yorker, I particularly felt it -- yes, there was fear for the country.

Q At the school, the President said he had to get back to Washington. He didn't, for a while. --

MR. FLEISCHER: Right.

Q Who told him he shouldn't?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, what happened was we boarded Air Force One at 9:45 a.m. And the President asked me to come directly into his cabin. I typically sit back in the staff section; the President asked me to come into his cabin. And I came in there and started taking verbatim notes of everything the President did and said. The President wanted me to do that; he understood the history of the moment.

And what took place is that the President got on Air Force One, and he got on the phone with the Vice President. And he said to him, "It sounds like we have a minor war going on here. I heard about the Pentagon." The President, on the drive from the school, heard that the Pentagon had been hit.

What we found --

Q Had you heard that, at that point?

MR. FLEISCHER: No. The first I heard of it was when the President said that to the Vice President.

Q What was your reaction?

MR. FLEISCHER: Who knows what the extent of this attack is? And the ability, the importance, now, of defending the country, collecting information, ascertaining the nature of the threat, the extent of the threat, and taking whatever steps could be taken to protect the country -- which was all rapidly happening back here at the White House, as Secretary Mineta of the

Boarded AFI @ 945

*Pres asked
him to -
in P's
Cabin
sketch
taking
Notes*

Department of Transportation grounded all airplanes, and as the CAPs started to go up over American cities. All of that started to happen very quickly.

Q Did he look angry to you, as the scale of this attack emerged?

MR. FLEISCHER: Oh, there's no question he was angry. He was hot. It was reflected in his words.

The things that the President said that morning on Air Force One became the absolute core of everything he did from September 11th forward. And I'll never forget it. His first reaction was, We are at war. And later in conversations he had with Secretary Rumsfeld and with others, he said, We will be patient, but we are at war.

I don't think it had to be that way. I think another President easily could have come to a different judgment, and could have said we will begin with sanctions, we will begin with an international conference, we will ratchet this up slowly and over time. One of the reasons, I think, that we were so successful in destroying al Qaeda and the Taliban as quickly as we did was because from the beginning, the President put the mission in his people. This is a war, you should plan for war. This is not about half-measures or sanctions. It is war. We will be patient; we're going to do it right. But no mistake, it's war.

Classic

Q And that began on Air Force One that morning?

MR. FLEISCHER: Immediately.

Q Describe Air Force One that morning. Who was on it, and what -- I mean, you took off very quickly. How -- what was the mood on board?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, everywhere the President goes, his entire travel is set up with an eye toward the unthinkable. And this really goes back to the Cold War, and this is probably the first time it had ever been, in any small way, even put into effect.

There's emergency evacuation plans always built in, always drilled. A number of the people who travel with him are there only for emergency purposes. There's, of course, a military aide who carries the nuclear football. He's in charge of evacuation -- obviously, the nuclear football never came into play that day.

The President always travels with one of his -- the Chief of Staff or the Deputy Chief of Staff. So there's a contingency group of people who are there for a number of reasons, but also

000084

for emergency. And the emergency plans started to get kicked in, and the issue was, should the President return to Washington?

The information we had as the morning unfolded -- the President boarded Air Force One at 9:45 a.m. We took off like a rocket ship -- I've taken off many times on that plane; I never remember it taking off as fast and as steep as it took off that day. And we started coming back to Washington. *call*

The first information we had -- now, we knew three aircraft had hit targets, the two World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. We heard there were three unidentified aircraft still in the air domestically; we heard there were two unidentified aircraft in the air internationally, bound for the United States. So five unidentified aircraft still in the air.

We heard, and it was reported in the media, that a car bomb had gone off at the State Department. We heard that the Mall was on fire. We heard -- and of course, this turned out to be erroneous -- Air Force One was next. We heard that there was an unidentified aircraft headed towards the President's ranch -- it later turned out to be a private plane of no consequence that should have been grounded, but wasn't grounded.

There's a fog of war. Early reports typically are wrong. But that is all the information we were yet receiving. When we heard about the plane that ultimately crashed in southwest Pennsylvania, the first report we heard on Air Force One was a plane is down in the vicinity of Camp David. And then we immediately found out, no, it was in southwest Pennsylvania. This is all part of the fog of war.

But we did believe that there were still four unidentified -- five -- four unidentified aircraft, after the plane went down in Pennsylvania. And so the Secret Service and the Vice President and Dr. Rice were strongly advising the President that it was too unsteady to return to Washington, that until we were able to ascertain the nature of the threat, whether these other aircraft were hijacked, or that they, too, could have the same fate, meet the same fate as the other planes that hit targets, it was deemed too unsteady a situation.

Q And what was his reaction to that advice?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the President very much wanted to get back to Washington. I think he recognized, in his mind, that the logical thing was not, for the President not to come back.

And one of the things that is drilled, as a result of the Cold War, is continuity of government. And it's something you never think about. You think about it when you say, Who's the Cabinet member who's not going to Congress for the State of the Union? Who gets left behind in case of a calamity at the

000085

Capitol? Ha, ha, ha -- that's a plan that's never in effect, we just have it on a shelf.

All of a sudden, continuity of government meant something, because we didn't know, it could have been an attempt to -- and I learned a new word that day -- an attempt to capitulate the government -- to take out the Congress, to take out the President and the Vice President, and to destroy the functioning of American government.

We did not know. At one point -- let's see -- the President was flying on Air Force One. He said -- the President was flying on Air Force One, and he turned to the head of the Secret Service detail and he said, "I want to go back home ASAP. I don't want whoever is doing this to hold me outside of Washington." And the head of the Secret Service detail said to him, "Our people are saying it's too unsteady still." And the President said, "Cheney says it's not safe to return yet as well." And then Andy Card, the Chief of Staff, said to the President, "The right thing is to let the dust settle."

And so the determination was made that the President needed to travel to Offutt Air Force Base out in Nebraska, where there were secure communications ability for the President to conduct the first National Security Council meeting of the day, and to be in touch, yet from a safe distance, so that we could determine what the extent of the attack was on our country.

Q During the course of that -- the first flight, I guess, to Louisiana -- both towers came down. How did the President get that news? Was he able to see it at all?

MR. FLEISCHER: We had television on board, but it wasn't very good. This was before -- we now have satellite television on Air Force One, but on September 11th we did not. As a result of September 11th, we upgraded the communications.

As we flew over market to market, you could pick up the local affiliates. But it was coming in, it was coming out. I don't recall seeing the Twin Towers collapse. But there were reporters in the back of the plane who did see it on the television in their section. And I remember the horrified look that was captured in a news magazine of one AP reporter who saw the tower come down.

Q When was the President informed that the towers had come down, with potentially massive loss of life?

MR. FLEISCHER: He had an open line to the Vice President throughout the flight. And so -- I may have been taking, writing up his notes for when he arrived at Barksdale Air Force Base. There was about a one hour period where I was not in his cabin, and it could have happened during that period of time,

000086

because I was not there when he actually heard about the tower crashing.

Q But he had an open line to the Vice President and the PEOC the whole time?

MR. FLEISCHER: Correct.

Q At Barksdale, the President was going to address the country again. What was the thinking going into what he needed to say?

MR. FLEISCHER: A message of strength and reassurance, a message of comfort, and a message of protection. The President wanted to let the country know that all the resources of the government were going to be available to help New Yorkers and to help people in the Pentagon, and help people in southwest Pennsylvania recover from the attacks; that all steps were being taken to protect the rest of the country from any potential harm. That was the core of the President's message.

Q You had some special instructions for the press there. What were they, and why?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we had to make one of the hardest decisions anybody could possibly make, and that was to slim down the crew traveling on Air Force One.

If you think about when the President travels, almost all his security is flown in ahead of time. His armored limo is flown in ahead of time, much of the Secret Service is flown in ahead of time and is pre-positioned on the ground to greet the President. On this day, when we left Florida, when we were going to come back to Washington and then could not come back to Washington, we landed somewhere, there were no pre-positioned assets at the Air Force base in Louisiana.

And the last thing we were going to do was spend any time on the ground in an unprotected fashion. And when the President leaves his airplane, typically he has to wait for the press to board the vans, for people to board the motorcade. There was no waiting. They were going to put the President in the position of safety as quick as they could.

And so when we left Louisiana, my job, unfortunately, was to take the 13 people in the press and reduce them to four, for the people who would travel with the President for the rest of the day. But it was crucial to have the press with the President. That's part of, also, the continuity of our government.

Q Can I pick up on that? Because there was some discussion -- there was a tape in which Ann Compton is heard saying, "Ari, someone has to stay with the President." Was there some discussion as to whether or not there should be any press?

000087

MR. FLEISCHER: No. No, no. It was always -- we -- it's one of the reasons that our country, every time we win a war -- we fight a war -- one of the reasons every time our country fights a war, we win the war, is because we have a free people. And we have a free people because we have a free press. And particularly, in a moment of national crisis, it's important for the people to know what the President is doing and where he is. And that means that the press needs to be there.

And so I had to make the decision to slim it down -- that way we didn't have to wait any period of time for many people to board a motorcade, when we didn't have a motorcade. We had to rag-tag assemble a series of vehicles to get the President off the plane and into a more secure environment once he landed.

But there was never a discussion of having no press there. It was just a question of a few press there. But we slimmed down our staff as well.

Q How do you make that decision, first of all, who goes, who doesn't go?

MR. FLEISCHER: It wasn't easy. I tried to make it on the basis of being fair and representative. And so we had the media that would represent the most organizations. And so we had a wire, we had a TV, we had a radio, and a photographer. And that covered all forms of media. People could get pictures, they could get TV pictures, and people could have one writer to describe it all and cover everything the President did.

But we had to drop many people who were redundant in that process. It was terribly controversial; I'll never forget one reporter, on the tarmac at Barksdale Air Force Base, screamed, "Who's in charge, the military or the civilians?" because this reporter got left behind.

Q So that flight, then, Air Force One would have been largely empty.

MR. FLEISCHER: It was a skeleton crew.

Q What did that feel like, at that moment in particular?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the number of people on Air Force One didn't feel one way or another. I mean, what everybody was feeling was what our country was going through, and what it must be like for the families whose relatives were working at the World Trade Center, or at the Pentagon.

Nothing you can ever do in government can prepare you for the day when you hear the United States is under attack. Nothing can ever prepare you to watch TV and see the World Trade Center

attacked, airplanes hitting it, fire, and the thoughts about how many people would be lost.

It's the same thing everybody in America was thinking. It's unimaginable, it's unthinkable, it's tragic. And the President's thoughts were already racing ahead to what the response would be, and that's why I thought it was so important -- and he talked to Secretary Rumsfeld at Barksdale Air Force Base while he was there, and he said to Secretary Rumsfeld, "It's a day of national tragedy, and we'll clean up the mess. And then the ball will be in your court, and Dick Myers' court, to respond." Dick Myers is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

And again, I think the President, immediately putting that mission into his people, that we need to plan for war, right from the beginning. But also throughout everything the President said in the course of the day, the need for patience, that we were not going to just launch cruise missiles into the sand in an act to satisfy or satiate America's immediate desire to take action. The President was determined to do this right, and to do it deliberately, no matter what the time it was to take. But he would do it massively.

Q One order he did have to give that day was to give combat air patrol pilots authority to shoot down U.S. commercial airliners. What do you remember about that? And there was a time when there was concern that United Airlines 93 was brought down by military action.

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, when it became clear that there were still planes in the sky that were unaccounted for, I think it was one of these things that looking back, you can say it must have been agonizing. But at the time, the President just made the decision and made it quickly, recognizing that if there were more enemy aircraft in the skies whose mission was to kill Americans, the only choice we had was to stop those planes from doing it again. And so the President quickly and immediately made that decision early on, when he boarded Air Force One, to give the order to shoot down a commercial flight.

And precautions
The Defense Department was ready to implement it. They had, obviously, precautions put in place to verify, to the last second, whether or not a plane was commercial and off-course, or whether it was another hijacked aircraft. But given the reality of the situation and the fact that we knew, now, that four planes had been hijacked, three hit targets, more planes were in the air -- it was the logical thing to do.

Q And do you remember any reaction of his, or others on board Air Force One, to the uncertainty surrounding what happened to Flight 93 and that maybe the military shot it down?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, mostly that played out in the PEOC here in the White House, because that's where you had more phone

000089

lines open. You know, Air Force One is set up for command and control in case of an emergency. But no matter what, an airplane in the air is not going to have as many phone lines and constant sources of information coming into it as a facility on the ground.

So it was here in the White House where they had the moments of doubt about whether that plane went down as a result of a hijacking, or whether it went down as a result of the military shooting it down.

And I remember the next day, at my briefing on September 12th, the first question I got from the press was, Is it possible the military shot down the plane in Pennsylvania?

Q Another famous image from that day is the arrival at Offutt. The President, and you and others, go into that little shed-like building, into the bunker. What can you tell us about that?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, that was the top of a staircase that led deep into a secure bunker. And when we got to Offutt, we didn't know how long we were going to be there, whether the President was going to have to spend the night there, or whether he'd be able to return to Washington.

The purpose of going to Offutt was, again, to go where there was a facility that could conduct a National Security Council meeting, with great communications and secure communications. And so we descended deep into this bunker, and the President went into his first National Security Council meeting.

I remember greeting the President immediately as he came out of the NSC meeting, and he said, We're going home. The President made the determination in that meeting that it was -- that he heard from people in Washington that it was safe to come home, and the decision was made to go home.

Q You know, we've seen those bunkers in Hollywood movies. What do they look like?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, they look like the Hollywood movies. Large screens and people in uniforms scurrying about, very deep into the earth. Hollywood got it right.

* * * * *

Q All right, let's get back to the continuity of government. Was there concern for the safety of the country? What was the scale of the fear for the country?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, the fear ran so deep that a concept that was a Cold War concept that I had never heard of actually came into play that day. And the fear was that this was an

000090

attack whose intent was to decapitate the government -- in other words, to take out the congressional leaders, to take out the President, to take out the Vice President, so our government could not function. Decapitation.

Q And then when you reduced -- at Barksdale, you had to make the decision.

MR. FLEISCHER: At Barksdale, in order to slim down the number of people traveling on Air Force One, so we could hit the ground and get moving as quickly as possible to maximize the President's safety, we had to make a decision to reduce the size of the press traveling with the President from 13 down to a skeleton crew of five.

Q Let me go back now to Offutt. The President comes out of this NSC meeting. What do you see in him? This is really his first chance to consult with his War Cabinet, with his national security team. What do you see in this man? What do you hear?

MR. FLEISCHER: I saw from the very beginning in the President just resolution. He was determined. And he was determined to protect the country, and to, as he later put it, bring justice to the people who attacked us. And that played itself out at the National Security Council meeting, where he first started to get information from Secretary Rumsfeld, from Dr. Rice, from others about the nature of the attack, the extent of the attack, the extent of the damage. And then already, he wanted people to start thinking about America's counterstrike, what we would do to bring justice to the people who did this.

Q So what do you make of people who say that he grew that day and in the subsequent days? That this was a relatively untested President -- this was only the, whatever, the seventh month of his term in office -- and that those first few hours, you saw a development in him?

MR. FLEISCHER: You know, I've asked the President that question. Because many people said the President has changed, September 11th changed, the President must have grown.

And so I put that question to him one day -- I think it was probably in late September. And what he said to me -- and I think this is totally valid -- was he believes that people either are cut out to be decisive, or they're not, when they take a presidential -- when they take the office. Whether the issue is war, or peace, or the issue is taxes, or Social Security -- either Presidents make judgments that turn out to be right, they are decisive and they are authoritative, or they're not.

And he believes that individuals carry those skills with them into office. And thank God for our country, most individuals have never been tested in this manner, because the country has not been attacked. But if you're in office when the

000091

country is attacked, if you're not cut out for decisiveness, I don't know that an attack on a country suddenly makes you decisive.

Q So he walks out of the NSC meeting and he says to you, We're going home. And you -- go back up the stairs?

MR. FLEISCHER: We climb back up the stairs, head home, get on Air Force One. And the President talks to the First Lady again, tells her that we're coming home, tells her that he loves her.

And then, at 5:05 p.m., the President starts to lay out the themes that he will use for the speech to the nation that night. The President is on the phone with Karen Hughes, and he says to her, "This is what I want to say to the country. We will find these people, and they will suffer the consequences of taking on this nation. We will do whatever it takes. Everyone must understand, this will not stand." And then he's just basically dictating the speech, and he says, "How grateful I am for what I've heard from world leaders. The world is uniting against terrorism." And he says, "No one is going to diminish the spirit of this country."

He called Ted Olson from Air Force One -- Ted Olson, the Solicitor General, whose wife was killed in one of the hijacked airplanes. I left the cabin, because I -- there were several times I deliberately left the cabin, because I thought the President should be private -- when he called Ted Olson, and when he called his wife, and when he called his father.

Q If I could just back up on that -- because not only is he the President making these decisions, he's a husband, he's a father, and he's a son. What did you see of the concern we all had for our loved ones that day, reflected in what he did and said?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, I think that he did like every American did. His first thought was the protection of his family and his loved ones. He asked the Secret Service immediately upon boarding Air Force One at 9:45 a.m. in the morning if his wife and his daughters were in safe locations. That was the first thing he said on boarding the flight. And then he immediately went to do his job.

And that's when he picked up the phone with the Vice President and said, "There's a minor war going on here. I heard about the Pentagon." So I think what people saw in President Bush on the 11th and forward was a little snapshot of what each of them was thinking: concern for their loved ones, and concern for their country.

Q And he reached out to his father as well?

000092

MR. FLEISCHER: Talked to his father as well. His father had been flying and was grounded by Secretary Mineta's order to put down all the airplanes, in Milwaukee. The President did relay later, he asked his father, he said, "Why are you in Milwaukee?" And he said, "Because you grounded my airplane."

Q So, on the way back, he's preparing for this speech. And on returning to Washington, gets in the chopper, and I guess goes --

MR. FLEISCHER: Yes, I'll never forget this. As the President is flying back on Marine One, back to the White House -- he had landed at Andrews, he gets into Marine One, and we're flying back in the helicopter.

And the helicopter flew a path this day over the Mall. And off the left-side window, you could see the Pentagon. So it was the President's first eye-to-eye connection with the attack on our country. And he said aloud, to nobody in particular, "The mightiest building in the world is on fire. That's the 21st century war you just witnessed." And that was his observation, having seen the smoldering, burning Pentagon.

Q At one point during the day, Ann Compton said she thought his eyes were red-rimmed. We all shed some tears that day. Did you see that at all?

MR. FLEISCHER: I didn't. He shed quite a few tears in the days after, particularly on Friday the 14th, one of the most gut-wrenching days imaginable. But I didn't see anything like that on the 11th.

Q So when he arrived back at the White House, who did he see?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, we immediately went into the Oval Office, and from the Oval Office there's a small hallway that leads to his private dining room. And we went into the private dining room, the President sat down with Dr. Rice, Andy Card was there, a number of senior staffers were there. And the President started going over his speech that he would later give in the Oval Office to the nation.

And there was one line in that speech particularly that jumped out, and that was, Those who harbor terrorists are as guilty as the terrorists, and will be treated as terrorists -- a major change in America's doctrine.

Q And -- I must say that -- let me ask you this; I don't know if this is something you can say. But one of the camera crews, on the arrival to the White House, left something out there. Had to go back, got escorted back -- believed he saw the President outside, before giving the speech to the

nation, actually on the green out there, hitting some golf balls. Do you remember that?

MR. FLEISCHER: No. News to me.

Q Does that make sense?

MR. FLEISCHER: I don't know. Right after we left the speech preparation, he went back to the residence to see Mrs. Bush. And there was some time between then and when he was going to give the speech. I remember going to the Oval Office right before he gave the speech, but I can't account for every minute in between.

Q He's a man of faith, obviously. What, if anything, did you see that reflected that part of him that day?

MR. FLEISCHER: Well, he's a man of great private faith. He prays a lot. But it's the type of thing he really does alone. He draws tremendous strength and comfort from prayer. And also, he draws tremendous comfort from receiving the prayers of the nation. I've heard him say on multiple times that -- how good it feels when people say to him, I'm praying for you, Mr. President. He says he can feel that. And I think that anybody who knows the power of faith knows what that means.

Q So, after the speech -- he's still at work that night. Has a couple more meetings.

MR. FLEISCHER: After the speech, the President then immediately went down to the second National Security Council meeting of the day, which was located in the PEOC. And the President descended down in there and convened a meeting, which was initially a larger meeting to talk about the response to the attack, in terms of the humanitarian response, the emergency worker response, the casualties. And then the group was slimmed down and became a war council meeting. And that's where they started planning for what would become war.

Q Let me ask you a personal question, if I can. That day, you're right at the center of historic events. But you're also going through it as an individual. Is there a moment, or an image in your mind, that captures the awe or the dread, or whatever it is, of that day? For you?

MR. FLEISCHER: I'll tell you, there are two things that, on a personal level, that really hit me.

September 11th, in an odd way, for me, was focusing on doing my job. I didn't stop to pause and take it in and think about how horrible this all was. Obviously you know it -- I mean, it hits you and you know it. I wasn't reflective and introspective about it; I didn't have time.

000094

Sept 14
1

September 14th, when the President began his day with a Cabinet meeting, which was an emotional Cabinet meeting, and then went to the National Cathedral to lead the nation in prayer. And they played the Battle Hymn of the Republic, those beautiful words took on such a different meaning that day, particularly "His Terrible Swift Sword," as you could start to feel the winds of war blowing.

The President then leaves the National Cathedral and we head up to New Jersey, to an Air Force base, and get in helicopters to go visit Ground Zero, the World Trade Center. Ten miles out of the World Trade Center, in the helicopters, you could smell the burning of the rubble around the World Trade Center. Three days later, ten miles in the air, over the ocean.

We arrived in the town in which I was born, go to the World Trade Center, where I've had dinner at Windows on the World with my family, and there it is, just lying in rubble. And I remember thinking, it's so tall; how can it be this small? The pile of rubble was seven, eight stories high. And it just -- it was surreal. It just didn't -- it almost -- how could you believe it?

And then came the hardest part, when the President went up to the Jacob Javits Center, where the families of those who were missing at the World Trade Center were. And he met with some 200 firemen and policemen's relatives. And it was supposed to be a 45-minute meeting and it lasted two hours.

And there was not a soul there who didn't think that their relative wasn't missing. No one, no one, thought anybody was dead. And I -- one family came up to me, and they said, Our son is a Marine. If anybody will be able to get out, it's our son. Everybody thought the same thing.

And people would come up to the President -- I remember this one woman came up to him, and -- he would go around, group by group by group, to listen to them, to hear their story of their loved one, to do his best to console them and to say, you know, everything is being done, we're doing everything we can to help rescue your missing relative.

And one woman came up to him and gave him a picture of her husband, and asked him to sign it. And he signed it, and she slid it in her Bible. And another little child, a little boy, was in his uncle's arms. And he looked at the President and he held up a picture. This boy had to be three or four, and he held up a picture of his father. And he points at his father and he says, "This is my daddy."

And I don't know that the little boy understood what was happening to his father. And the President said, "I'm sure he's going to be all right." And -- to his uncle, as he's holding him in his arms.

000095

And for two hours, the President listened to every single person's story of their missing relative. And it just struck me that when the President left, he just drew from their sorrow the strength of our nation, and a reminder of what this was about. This was about bringing justice to the American people, whose lives were taken, their relatives' lives were taken, because somebody attacked our country.

And we leave the Javits Center, and the motorcade is driving down 42nd Street. Forty-second Street could have been Main Street on any Midwestern, small American town anywhere. People were lined 15, 20 deep, holding candles, signs saying, "God Bless America," "God Bless the United States."

And I'll never forget when we went by Times Square, the electronic billboard was going round, and it said, "Bush calls up 50,000 reservists." And a day that began with a little crying, an emotional prayer service, visiting Ground Zero, hearing the sorrow and the sadness and the tales of the families at the Javits Center -- as we left Manhattan, you could feel the winds of war sweeping, as that sign said, "Bush calls up 50,000 reservists."

And that was September 14th. A tough day.

Q Thanks. Good stuff, thank you.

MR. FLEISCHER: There was one other thing -- just on a personal level.

For me, I was still focused on doing my job for the President, talking to the press and informing them about everything the President was doing and seeing. I really just became the press's eyes and ears; that way, the country would know what the President was doing when the country wasn't watching the President directly themselves. I was all work-focused.

And it took me about a week after September 11th, when it was Rosh Hashanah. And I went to synagogue that night -- I finally stopped working. I went to Rosh Hashanah services, the night services. And I came home and I called my family up in New York. And the first time I cried was when I talked to my cousin, who told me that she worked in Manhattan, and she could see the World Trade Center from her office.

And that was the first time it hit me -- that was the first time it hit me as a person, as an American, and not as somebody doing my job. That's when it really brought it home. It took me a week, and I finally had my cry.

Q Thanks.

000096

END

12:35 P.M. EDT

000097